



## The Path to Royal Absolutism:

### The Renaissance and Early 17th Century

(end of the 15th -- first half of the 17th centuries)

Source: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bnf/bnf0004.html>

The political and cultural history of France from 1498 to 1661, that is, from Louis XII's accession to the throne to Louis XIV's personal assumption of power, can be divided into three major phases. The first, up to the death of Henry II in 1559, looked to Italy as a land ripe for conquest and as an inspiration for France's own Renaissance.

The second period (1562-1598) saw the realm convulsed by eight civil wars--the Wars of Religion--as France grappled with the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was both a theological dispute about the proper understanding and practice of Christianity and a political controversy about the legal status of the new Reformation churches. In France, the conflict took on a further political dimension when members of the high nobility attempted to take advantage of the chaos to wrest power from the king. Factions tore each other apart. The weakened monarchy had to reconquer Paris (1594) and drive the Spanish from the kingdom (1597). Henry IV finally reestablished the monarchy's legitimacy when he legally recognized French Protestants and gave them freedom of worship.

Henry IV's conversion to Catholicism in 1594 inaugurated a new era and a new dynasty of French kings, the Bourbons. Through a governance as militaristic and absolutist as that of any of his predecessors, Henry censored writers and preachers in the name of public peace. Ironically, he would be assassinated in 1610 (after nineteen unsuccessful attempts on his life), falling victim to the very violence and religious passions he sought to quell.

During the half-century that followed, Cardinal Richelieu (b. 1585-d. 1642) orchestrated the royal government's reconquest of domestic control. The monarchy reinforced its monitoring of printing, totally strangling the emerging press. The French language itself became an object of government concern through the newly created *Académie Française*, a fitting example of Richelieu's overall program of state control over politics and culture. Once the last rebellion of the feudal nobility was suppressed, the framework and mechanisms of absolute monarchy were in place, needing only the arrival of Louis XIV to complete the scene.